

Language Play in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Implications for Practice

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to present evidence for the use of language play by children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) within the context of play with peers. A conceptual framework for the development of language play is described. This framework, which is supported by the literature on language play in typically developing children, is used to assess patterns of language play in children with ASD. The findings of a descriptive study are used to provide evidence for language play in the speech of children with ASD during interactions with typical peers and show that children with ASD use language play in a similar way as their typically developing peers with the exception of age of occurrence. Implications for clinicians in their work with children with ASD are discussed as they relate to the existence of language play in children with ASD and the function of language play as a tool for language learning.

KEYWORDS: Language play, autism spectrum disorders (ASD), children, language development

Learning Outcomes: As a result of this activity, the reader will be able to (1) identify and define language play and language play types and (2) apply a developmental framework for describing language play in the speech of children with autism spectrum disorder.

This is my “power wrist analyzer.” (Louis)
“Mississippi, Mississippi, Mississippi, Mississippiiiii”
(Louis and Ryan singing in unison)
“Let’s get back in the jolly darn race!” (Louis)
“Mama, mommy, I’m just kidding.” (Louis looking into the camera)

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This is the “sound” of the language that will evolve throughout this article as the existence of language play in children who are typically developing and in children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is revealed. Concisely defined, “language play” is the manipulation of sounds, words, syntax, meaning, even pragmatics for the purpose of amusement, imagination, language learning, and the verification of reality.¹⁻⁴ Historically, “language play” has been described as “sense in nonsense,”⁵ “. . . a mode of experiencing,”⁶ and “intrinsic . . . carried on for its own sake.”⁷ Within the context of this article, “language play” is identified as nonscripted, creative, interactive vocalizations in the context of play. The purpose of this exposition is to define the types of language play described in the literature for children who are typically developing, to examine the existence of language play in children with ASD, and to discuss clinical implications for assessment and intervention in young children with ASD.

Analysis of language play in typically developing children has led researchers to classify types, identify frequency of use and function, and establish stages of development to determine how language play contributes to language development and determine its relationship to metalinguistic awareness.^{1-4,8} This analysis revealed that a variety of language play exists, including phonological (“play with sounds”), morphological (“play with words”), syntactical (“play with structure/grammar”), semantic (“play with meaning”), and pragmatic play (“play with linguistic social rules”), as well as combinations of the above types. For example, Ely and McCabe⁸ showed that language play appeared in a large proportion of children’s classroom discourse; almost 1 in every 4 utterances from their study included some type of language play. Crystal² and others^{5,6} found that there are developmental stages of language play. Specifically, children appear to learn to manipulate sounds first, followed by syllables or words, and then begin to play with meaning, grammar, and pragmatics. Investigations by Becker,⁹ Crystal,² and Schwartz⁴ suggested that the use of language play helps children practice the grammatical rules of language they have learned as well as experiment with new

vocabulary in their lexicon. Additionally, a link between language play and metalinguistic awareness has been presented, since both require an individual to step back from language and either manipulate it, as with language play, or talk about it, as with metalinguistic abilities.² However, the degree to which research supports this positive relationship is limited and requires more investigation. Further, more advanced forms of language play, such as verbal games, like “Simon says,” “knock, knock,” or even “pig Latin,” require functional social interaction to maximize their implicit humor.

In contrast, the language play of children diagnosed with ASD has not been studied. Since one of the identifying impairments involved in a diagnosis of ASD is a deficit and/or delay in communication abilities, a presumption might be made that language play does not exist in the verbalizations of individuals with ASD. In fact, children with ASD have been shown to exhibit particular difficulties with pragmatic aspects of language, including making inferences and having trouble interpreting others’ mental states.¹⁰⁻¹² Therefore, it is counterintuitive that children with ASD and specific impairments in the social uses of language would exhibit language play. However, Tager-Flusberg¹¹ calls on researchers to study the heterogeneous language abilities among individuals with ASD to increase our understanding of possible homogeneous subsets of language skills. Additionally, she claims that language development, of which language play is theoretically a part, is an area lacking research among these individuals. Further, Dennis and colleagues¹⁰ posit that some children with ASD who exhibit average cognitive abilities actually make some pragmatic inferences required for successful communication. Since our understanding of the language abilities of individuals with ASD is incomplete, particularly in the area of language development, much can be gained from further investigation of this topic.

In this article, evidence of language play use by children with ASD is presented from a descriptive study examining language play in the verbalizations of children with ASD between ages 4 to 6, during interactions with typically developing peers.¹³ Additionally, results showing differences between language

play use by children with ASD and its use by typically developing children are explained as they relate to the developmental framework offered by Crystal² and Garvey.⁶ These results serve as this article's context for discussing linguistic and social implications for clinicians working with children with ASD.

The descriptive study considered the questions of whether language play existed in the play of children with ASD and their typically developing peers as well as how the language play of young children with ASD differed from the language play of their age-matched typical peers during peer play intervention. It was hypothesized that children with ASD use certain forms of language play with their peers during play. It was also expected that the development of language play in young children with ASD would be delayed and consist primarily of phonological play and/or play with syllables. As the findings are revealed, they support further examination of the development of language play in children with ASD and the role it may have in the linguistic and social development of children with ASD, as language play is implicitly humorous and does not decrease as a child matures, but changes and advances to new forms. A brief discussion of the existence of language play in children who are typically developing and the specific types observed is presented first, followed by an explanation of the developmental framework that has been proposed by researchers. Research on the language play of typically developing children is provided and the function served by language play is discussed. The results of a descriptive study of language play in children with ASD are presented next. Comparisons are made between the two groups related to types of language play observed and age of occurrence. The article ends with some implications for practice when working with children affected by ASD.

EXISTENCE OF LANGUAGE PLAY IN TYPICALLY DEVELOPING CHILDREN

Previous research provides clear evidence for the existence of language play in the verbalizations of typically developing children.^{1-5,8,9,14-16} Table 1 provides definitions and examples of the types of language play

described in the literature for typically developing children. These types include phonological (sound play), morphological (word play), syntactical (grammar play), semantic (meaning play), and pragmatic play (play with linguistic social rules). Language play has been studied in a variety of contexts including free play,³ a classroom,⁹ and at home.⁸ It has been observed and evaluated between children and their peers,⁹ between pairs of children,³ and between parents and child.⁸ In these circumstances, percentages of language play and types of language play have been tabulated from written language transcripts, demonstrating its prevalence in the speech of young children. The following text provides evidence of developmental patterns of language play use derived from the literature on language play.

DEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORK OF LANGUAGE PLAY

There is agreement in the literature that language play first appears in the form of sound play at the age of 1 year.^{2,4,6,16} Vocalization and motor activity are coupled to create melodic strings of syllables, humming, chanting, and singing between 1 and 2 years. More structured phonological play develops shortly thereafter, including prosodic variations culminating in language-specific, conversation-like utterances (e.g., "*Let Bobo bink. Bink ben bink*").³ Children introduce symbolic noises making sounds that represent actions like the siren of an ambulance, the ring of a telephone, the sound of something falling and crashing.² From age 2 onward, children continue to play using varying syllable structure with reduplication, sound swapping, and within-word pauses (e.g., "*Now it's done un un; Done un un un un*").⁴

At around 3 years, typically developing children begin rhyming (e.g., *Go up high/High in the sky and Mother mear/Mother smear...peer...fear* (Garvey⁶)). At this age, language play is primarily a solitary activity, but between the ages of 3 and 4, pairs and groups of children begin to respond and team up to create strings of sound, word, and structural play.² Nonsense and semantically bound name creations generally become apparent around 4 years of age, although some cases have

Table 1 Categories of Language Play

Type	Definition	Example
Phonological play ("sound play")	Melodic, rhythmic strings of syllables including chanting, humming, singing and conversation-like babble	"Let Bobo bink. Bink ben bink." Weir ⁵ in Esposito ³)
Morphological play ("word play")	Lexical innovations by means of prefixation, suffixation, conversion, compounding and including nonsense word creation, and the rhyming of words	A: Cause it's fishy too. Cause it has fishes. B: And it's snakey too cause it has snakes and it's beary too because it has bears. A: And it's . . . it's hatty cause it has hats. (Garvey ⁶ in Crystal ²)
Syntactical play ("grammar play")	Selection of a grammatical pattern and substituting in words of same form	What color? What color blanket? What color map? What color glass? ^{4,5} (Weir ⁵ in Schwartz ⁴)
Semantic play ("meaning play")	Recitation of nursery rhymes, metaphors, hyperboles, intensifiers, superlatives, and deliberate changes of the real and unreal	Ten thousand more minutes. ⁸ The village rode past the peasant. (Chukovsky ¹⁴ in Schwartz ⁴)
Pragmatic play ("play with linguistic social rules")	Linguistic manipulation that breaks socially accepted uses of language (i.e., opposite statements, taking on another vocal register)	There I all done. ⁸ (baby talk)
Combination play	A mixture of phonological, morphological, structural, semantic and/or pragmatic play in one context	San Diego, Sandiego, Sandi Ego San Diego, Sandi ego Eggs aren't sandy! ¹⁵ (combination of phonological and meaning play)

demonstrated this form of language play earlier (e.g., *Mr. Ding, Mr. Moggly Boggly*,² *weighter (scale), sneak-shoes (slippers), nose-beard (whiskers)*).⁹

Pragmatic rule-breaking play also emerges at age 4 and increases when a child enters school. This is when a child picks up on a social obscenity or subtlety exploiting it verbally (e.g., bum, knickers, Mrs. Poop says good morning when it is night time).² By age 5, collaboration to create unique rhyming words and short phrases is a norm and the dialogue between children can become quite elaborate, as in this example of morphological play, "A: *Cause it's fishy too. Cause it has fishes. B: And it's snakey too cause it has snakes and it's beary too because it*

has bears. A: And it's. . . it's hatty cause it has hats" (Garvey⁶ as cited in Crystal²). It is important to note here that the word order of Standard English is usually used even when nonsense words occur in a rhyme, as in the above example.⁴ At age 5, a less common form of language play, semantic play, emerges. For example, Schwartz⁴ elaborates on a boy who drew a picture of many hearts saying, "*This is a very hearty story.*" Sometimes, forms of language play are combined, as in this example, "*San Diego, Sandiego, Sandi Ego, San Diego, Sandi Ego; Eggs aren't sandy!*"¹⁶ when through a child's sound play, a play on meaning is discovered. The culmination of the numerous varieties of sound, structure, and meaning play is that of verbal

games and pseudointellectual games which emerge at around 7 years and incorporate the simpler forms of language play as well as require rules and a social context in which to be played.

Thus, the literature provides a general developmental sequence of language play.^{2-4,6,8,9} First, typically developing children manipulate sounds in their play, then syllables, followed by words. Subsequently, children exhibit play with the structure of language, while maintaining the learned grammatical rules and syntax of their native language. Esposito³ observed 32 3½- to 5-year-olds in pairs for 15 minutes in a playroom. Language play was found in 13% of their utterances. Of this 13%, 93% involved play with sound and 7% involved structural play. Ely and McCabe⁸ studied 20 children, ranging from 5 years to 6 years, 8 months old and discovered that 23.2% of their verbal utterances were language play. Of this 23.2%, 7.7% consisted of phonological play and 15.5% consisted of word play. Key differences between these two studies involve the length of observation and the age of the participants; however, the results of both studies indicate the prominence of sound play at early ages and the decrease in this type of play as children mature. Finally, children incorporate semantic and pragmatic acts of language play, which most often require a social context with a partner or group of individuals to complete or to create humor. Language play can be neutral or humorous, but often the more social and advanced forms, such as pragmatic, semantic, or combination language play, are humorous because they rely on the subtle nuances or inferences intrinsic to intentional communication.

FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE PLAY

Several themes in the study of language play warrant discussion as they will factor in to how the language play of children with ASD compares to that of their typically developing peers. These themes relate to the function of language play and its impact on the language and social development of children. Research has debated this issue.^{1,5} Language play has been considered a tool for language acquisition. Its application provides a child with a technique for practicing

learned grammatical rules and vocabulary.⁶ Weir⁵ states, "The pleasure of play is structured so that it serves as a linguistic exercise." Cook¹ confirms this explanation by describing three potential functions and rationales for language play. First, he believes that language play aids in first-language acquisition, providing a context within which to reinforce children's learned linguistic units (sounds and words) and structures (syntax). He posits that the fictional world or nonsense created by language play allows the practicing child more freedom to manipulate these linguistic forms in ways that highlight their functional role in the communication system. Schwartz⁴ also identifies particular areas for which the subtypes of language play are used as practice. For example, structural play, including substitution of certain grammatical elements like nouns or verbs, specifically works toward the mastery of syntax. An example of this from Weir's⁵ data is "*What color? What color blanket? What color map? What color glass?*," where the nominative noun is replaced several times. Second, Cook¹ suggests language play contributes to the development of interpersonal relationships, thus serving a social function. It continues to involve practice with learned linguistic rules but also incorporates the conventions of social exchanges.⁴ Intrinsic to this social function of language play is the fact that children are learning language that can be used as a means to an end, as is characteristic of intentional communication. Schwartz⁴ elaborates that just as one practices a newly learned skill, such as hitting a baseball, outside its social context (i.e., the baseball game) until a certain level of mastery has been achieved, children also practice playing with sounds, words, and grammatical patterns until the point when they can use it to accomplish successful circles of communication. Finally, Cook¹ explains that language play serves to strengthen group solidarity, another social function. In other words, the telling of a joke, tongue-twister, or rhyme, singing a silly song, or making up nonsense words establishes and reinforces the relationship between the language play creator and listener or cocreators. As will be discussed later, this critical social role of language play explains why it may be particularly difficult for children with ASD to use,

since one of the core impairments of ASD is a lack of understanding about how to socially interact with others.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ However, this potential social role or function even more strongly indicates why it is important to provide opportunities for the use of language play by children with ASD.

Another social function of language play that is less concerned with interpersonal relationships is its role as a verification of reality. This role becomes apparent as developmentally more complex forms of language play, such as pragmatic and semantic play, emerge and are perfected, especially during pretend play. The idea behind this kind of play is to test learned linguistic information about the world. A clear example of this was discussed by Chukovsky,¹⁵ who collected samples of the language play of children 2 to 5 years of age. He identified examples where the children deliberately mismatched sounds to animals (e.g., for a dog, *meow* was produced; for a rooster, *bow-wow* was produced). Chukovsky¹⁵ also analyzed Russian folk rhymes and found numerous reversals of reality, such as situations where a beetle is being ridden rather than a horse, or a village rides past the peasant. He concluded that when children create this kind of pragmatic or semantic nonsense, they are verifying their knowledge of the world around them. Other examples of this kind of play include, "*The blind man gazes, the deaf man listens, the cripple runs a race, the mute cries for help,*" and "*One and a half miles of jug, the peasant grabbed the dog and beat the stick, the dough is kneading the woman.*"¹ Cook¹ takes this theory one step further stating that the use of language play and the development of imaginary worlds allow for the exploration of real-life hypothetical scenarios and increases a person's flexibility for handling spontaneous situations, which in turn enriches a person's understanding of the world and ability to think creatively.

Language play also functions for the purpose of creating pleasure and humor. Cook¹ calls this the "creativity" explanation. He suggests that the first function of language is the creation of imaginative worlds: lies, games, fictions, or fantasies. From this use may emerge the capacity for intricate social organization and complex knowledge.¹ Schwartz⁴ defends this

pleasure function of language play by describing very early instances where children are introduced to it via the utterances of their parent(s) as in "peek-a-boo" or tickling games, often accompanied by verbal utterances and smiles. Crystal² defines instances of language play as "when people manipulate the forms and functions of language as a source of fun for themselves and/or for the people they are with." Therefore, language play is justifiable for its own sake, as a means for pleasure and fun. Mitchell²⁰ captures this function of language play well:

"There is no better play material in the world than words. They surround us, go with us through our work-a-day tasks, their sound is always in our ears, their rhythms on our tongue. Why do we leave it to special occasions and to special people to use these common things as precious play material? . . . when we turn to the children . . . to whom all the world is as play material, who think and feel through play, can we not . . . listen and watch for the patterns or words and ideas? Can we not care for the *way* we say things to them and not merely *what* we say? Can we not speak in rhythm, in pleasing sounds, even in song for the mere sensuous delight it gives us and them, even though it adds nothing to the content of our remark? If we can, I feel sure children will not lose their native use of words . . ."

From the Introduction²⁰

In summary, the research on language play has established a developmental sequence for the use of language play progressing from phonological to morphological play at the syllable and word levels, to semantic and structural play, and then to pragmatic play. Studies by Ely and McCabe⁸ and Esposito³ document the sequence that sound play is more common in younger children and word and structural play is more common as children mature, beginning at around age 5. The function of language play has been postulated in four general areas: (1) as practice of learned grammatical rules and vocabulary; (2) as a way to verify one's knowledge of reality; (3) as a social act supporting the understanding of interpersonal relationships;

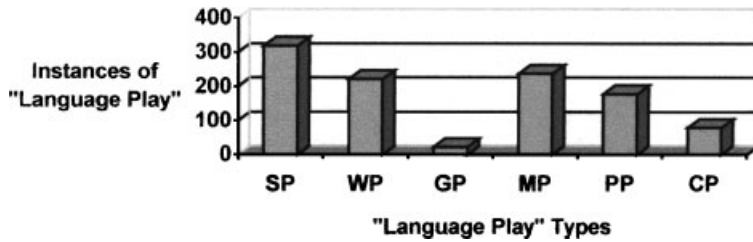


Figure 1 Instances of "language play" used by child participants with ASD. SP, sound play (phonological play); WP, word play (morphological play); GP, grammar play (syntactic play); MP, meaning play (semantic play); PP, pragmatic play (play with linguistic social rules); CP, combination play (a mixture of "language play" types).

and (4) for the purpose of creating joy and humor in one's environment. These four functions have clear connections to the language and social development of young children. Using this developmental framework and proposed functions of language play, the language play of children with ASD was analyzed in a descriptive study¹³ for the purpose of identifying its nature among these individuals and determining ways to support its use by children with ASD as they develop better language and social skills. The following discussion summarizes relevant results of a descriptive study examining the existence of language play use by children with ASD and how that use compares to that of typically developing children in play. Subsequently, speculations are presented regarding the implications the existence of language play makes for clinicians working with children with ASD.

LANGUAGE PLAY USE BY CHILDREN WITH ASD

Corbett¹³ examined the language play use of 3 pairs of children (one with ASD and one typically developing), ages 4 to 6 years, engaged in facilitated play in the home setting. She found that children with ASD used phonological play more frequently than other types of language play. Semantic, morphological, and pragmatic play followed in that order. A combination of play types and syntactic play occurred much less frequently. These descriptive results indicate that instances of language play are evident in the speech of children with ASD with phonological or sound play predominating. Figure 1 displays the occurrence of play types for the participating children with ASD.

Specific examples of language play exhibited by participants with ASD are included in Table 2.

Table 2 Examples of Language Play Types for Children with ASD

Type	Example
Phonological play ("sound play")	Whoa, whoa, whoa Look at me. Look at pee. Beerumpumberump!
Morphological play ("word play")	You wheelie. Macaroni, macaroni; Macaroni, macaroni (sing-song) This is my power-wrist analyzer.
Syntactical play ("grammar play")	None available
Semantic play ("meaning play")	What a big puddle Oklahoma! I'm going super speedy. Let's get back in the jolly darn race!
Pragmatic play ("play with linguistic social rules")	(baby talk, looking at camera) Mama, mommy. I'm just kidding.
Combination play	I know action crabby. (word plus meaning play)

COMPARISONS BETWEEN THE LANGUAGE PLAY OF CHILDREN WITH ASD AND THEIR TYPICALLY DEVELOPING PEERS

Some notable comparisons can be made for the frequency of language play types used by children with ASD and their typical peers in the Corbett¹³ study. The observed frequencies reflect a pattern of use that follows the previously outlined developmental framework. The percentage of sound and word play by the children with ASD exceeded those of their typical peers. Meaning play, however, was used similarly among the participants. In contrast, the occurrence of grammar and pragmatic play by the typically developing participants exceeded those of the children with ASD. Notably, individual differences did exist, particularly between the youngest pair of participants who were 4 years old at the time of the study. The child with ASD used significantly more sound play than his peer, whereas the typically developing child used more pragmatic play than the child with ASD. The amount of word play used by both participants was approximately the same, however; the child with ASD used sound and word play to a greater extent than other language play types. In contrast, the typically developing peer used a more even distribution of language play types, incorporating pragmatic play in his verbalizations.

Generally, the patterns of use of language play types by the typically developing participants and child participants with ASD fit with the reported research^{2,4,6} on developmental frameworks of language play, with the exception that grammar play figured minimally in the speech of all participants in the Corbett study.¹³ Play with sound and syllables develops first. This is the language play type used most by the child participants with ASD and the typically developing participants in this study, particularly the youngest pair of participating children (both 4 years old). They would often play with syllables, repeating them at varied speeds (i.e., *σσωσωσσωσσωσσω σωσσωσσω; hop, hop, hop, hop, hop, hop*). All pairs, however, frequently used sound play. Examples include constant siren and car noises in the context of scooter play and prosodic sound effects in concert with an action (i.e., throwing a ball, spinning

around in a circle, watching the flight of a stomp rocket).

The typically developing children in the Corbett¹³ study generally used language play in ways consistent with the presented developmental framework; however, they used it less frequently than expected. For the children with ASD, word, meaning, and pragmatic play followed sound play in frequency of occurrence, with meaning play being slightly more common than word play and pragmatic play being slightly less common than word play. Examples of these types include: nonsense word creation (i.e., *power-wrist analyzer, jolly darn race*), exaggeration of states (i.e., *the never be killed power, the deepest water in the world*—referring to a puddle), made-up songs (i.e., George's *macaroni* song), and an exchange of names (i.e., Robert's adult facilitator called by name of videographer, Robert's typical peer called by his brothers' names).

Corbett's results support the hypothesis that children with ASD follow a developmental sequence for language play similar to typically developing children, but are delayed in their acquisition.¹³ Crystal² and Schwartz⁴ describe sound play as the first type of language play to develop, suggesting it occurs among typically developing 2- and 3-year-olds. This developmental sequence is most clearly demonstrated by the youngest (4 years of age) of the child participants with ASD, as he predominantly used sound and word play. He did not display the range of language play that typical children his age are theorized to show and appears delayed in his language play use. In comparison, older participants who were 6 years of age exhibited greater variability in their language play, including fairly similar frequencies of sound, word, meaning, and pragmatic play. The language play pattern exhibited by the older participants with ASD also fits the developmental model as they have gained an ability to use other types of language play with an increase in age.

The reduced use of pragmatic play overall, however, supports previous research on the ability of children with ASD to use and manipulate language for social purposes.²¹⁻²⁴ Although older participants had some use of pragmatic play with their peers, these instances

were limited usually to a specific activity or event across sessions. For example, as mentioned above, one boy with ASD persisted in calling his adult facilitator by the name of the videographer and his participating typical peer by the names of his two brothers. Another 6-year-old boy with ASD persisted in manipulating the words “*poo, poop, Mr. Poop,*” in various ways with his peer partner, breaking the rules on language use set up by the adult facilitator. Hence, although pragmatic play existed for the pairs in this study, it was limited and more common in the speech of the typically developing peer.

The significantly low occurrence of syntactic play in this study bears describing, since this infrequency is not described in the developmental framework on language play reported in the research.^{2,4,6} For all three pairs, syntactic play (i.e., play with language form and grammar) is virtually nonexistent in the speech of the child participants with ASD and that of their typically developing peers. Previous research suggests that this language play type should follow phonological and morphological play in acquisition.²⁻⁴ It is possible that the nature of the peer play from which language play data were drawn did not provide the opportunity for this type of language play to occur due to its focus on child-directed and adult-facilitated play. It may be that grammar play is more common in contexts when a structured academic activity is being conducted, since it requires attention primarily to the form of language being used as opposed to content. The pretend play incorporated into the peer play sessions these child pairs were involved in may facilitate more play with the meaning of language. This is an area for future research.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Some preliminary research¹³ shows that language play exists in the speech of young children with ASD and that its use is generally similar to that of typically developing children with the exception that its acquisition appears to be delayed. This means that a child with ASD around age 4 may just be starting to use forms of language play that are expected of a typical 2- to 3-year-old. Given this knowledge

the question becomes, how can clinicians use this information in their work with young children with ASD? This article proposes five reasons clinicians might take advantage of the use of language play in the verbalizations of children with ASD and reinforce its use as a way to potentially support their language and social development.

First, the existence of language play use by children with ASD is evidence of their ability to experiment with language. The evidence reviewed in this article shows that some children with ASD are capable of using language play when playing with a typical peer in a comfortable and natural setting such as the child's home. Language play has been defined as non-scripted, creative, interactive vocalizations in the context of play; therefore, its established use by children with ASD challenges the assumption that these children are generally capable only of using language in rote, repetitive utterances to communicate. Other researchers such as Tager-Flusberg¹¹ and Dennis and associates¹⁰ support further investigation of such unique linguistic abilities of children with ASD, as there is a definite need to find more effective ways to help these children become intentional social communicators.

Second, instances of language play in the speech of children with ASD provide clinicians with opportunities to support creative, interactive uses of language, in other words, to facilitate continued exploration of language forms and content. It is particularly important that those who work with children with ASD be able to identify such instances, so they can support their existence in a way that encourages further exploration of intentional, interactive communication. The previously described definitions of language play types and the developmental framework for language play should help clinicians determine if, when, and how language play is being used.

Third, Becker,⁹ Cook,¹ Crystal,² and Schwartz⁴ present language play as a form of language learning, a way to experiment with learned grammatical rules and meanings. Therefore, the use of language play by children with ASD gives evidence that some children with ASD may be able to take part in this type of “bottom up” learning. In other words, they

may be able to use what they know about language content and forms to experiment with or validate their knowledge. If this is the case, it is critical that clinicians develop ways to maximize these moments of language learning.

Fourth, based on the literature and Corbett's¹³ preliminary findings, language play may be considered a moment of flexibility, when a child with ASD is open to altering his or her typical pattern of speech and language use. This is a golden moment for a clinician targeting communication and language development with a child with ASD. This point must be researched further to understand what a child with ASD is doing when he or she engages in language play and why these moments occur when they do. An understanding of language play use in a particular child with ASD could serve as a guide for clinicians to determine when and how to support language play use.

Finally, language play is humorous by nature, which makes it an intrinsically motivating way to experiment with language and potentially learn how to manipulate new forms.^{1,2} Its use by young children with ASD, as described by Corbett,¹³ signifies that some children with ASD have the potential to develop language play use and may be able to use it to become more interactive and intentional in their communication. It will be important to continue studying the use of language play by children with ASD to determine what the linguistic and cognitive characteristics are of those who use it, how it may be linked to language and social development, and to what extent it affords these children greater communicative flexibility. It is also critical to realize that the uniqueness of each child with ASD means the extent to which language play appears in their speech will vary. Thus, the ways clinicians support language play use during their work with children with ASD will need to be attuned to the child's individual needs. As a start, clinicians can consider the patterns of language play use found in Corbett's¹³ study and the developmental framework described by Crystal,² Cook,¹ Garvey,⁶ and others to identify and respond to instances of language play in the verbalizations of children with ASD.

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